STEPPING BACK FROM LIFE
Matthew 4:1-11
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In the early days of Christianity there were men and women who lived out their lives in the desert wilderness as an expression of their devotion to Christ. In the second, third and fourth centuries, in the desert mostly, as solitary hermits, or in small, isolated religious communities, these Desert Fathers and Desert Mothers, as they are known to church historians, worked, meditated, prayed, and gave their lives to a pure vision of Christlike devotion. The passing of time has rendered them obscure. Western civilization does worse by them. They seem to us slightly bizarre, certainly eccentric, perhaps even mad. Who would want to live a whole lifetime, alone, in the desert?

Another perspective, however, suggests that they may have discovered and expressed a dimension of Christianity that we, in our time, have lost entirely. An objective observation might suggest that since they were closer in terms of both time and space to the Jesus of history, they might more appropriately judge our Christianity, than we theirs. They may, that is to say, have something to teach us.

The precedent is Biblical. The text this morning tells the story of Jesus in the wilderness, alone. A fascinating insight about this incident is that it must have found its way into early Christian tradition and thus into the record because Jesus, himself, had told the story to His disciples. No one else, after all, was there. He spent forty days there after His baptism. He had not yet begun what we call His ministry. He was, as far as we know, an ordinary Palestinian carpenter until this point. The experience in the desert, therefore, becomes highly critical, the creative source, perhaps, out of which the rest of His life flowed.

The desert - the wilderness it was called - was a place of loneliness; dry, lifeless, inhabited by spirits as anyone knows who had heard the "howling of the desert", I am told. Israel wandered around in the wilderness for forty years on the way to becoming a nation. It is a creative place, that is to say. But it is also a place of struggle, mental, emotional, and spiritual refining, a place and time for difficult decisions to be made, which is the way creative places always are.

What He had to decide was how to live out the rest of His life in light of what had happened to Him at baptism. He had a growing conviction that God had chosen Him. I have never been personally comfortable with the notion that Jesus simply lived out a script already written for Him by God, or that He foresaw everything that would happen to Him in the future. That is, He had real decisions to make about how to proceed as God's chosen servant.

His temptations were all possible ways to proceed. They are not evil in themselves. The story portrays Satan as the protagonist: subtle, wily, knowing, rather appealing, actually The first proposal is to be relevant - "forget about those dusty old prayer shawls - turn rocks into bread." The second suggestion is to be attractive, spectacular - "get their attention by jumping off the temple. You can't do any good as long as you are still a voice crying in the wilderness. You need a little press, a little ink." The third proposal is to gain influence, power...after all, what better way to bring in God's Kingdom, than to have a bit of political clout? Satan presents a package which looks for all the world like something a modern Public Relations firm might create. In fact, in light of what transpires on T.V. on Sunday morning, I'm not sure that it hasn't already happened.

Jesus rejected each one of those suggestions, not because they were immoral or sinful. My understanding of the passage is that the nature of His identity is at stake. His faithfulness and obedience are the question. He must decide to be God's man on His own terms. Nothing must interfere with that, not even a potentially good maneuver, like feeding the people.

What interests me primarily about this story this morning is the fact that Jesus went into the wilderness in the first place: that part of what He became and part of what He said and part of what He did was forged in an experience of withdrawal from life, a disciplined, extended, silent and lonely step back from life. The Desert Fathers and Desert Mothers in the second century were close enough to the incident to understand it. They may have overdone it a bit. But I am convinced that they knew something about Christianity and faithfulness and humanity and salvation that we have forgotten.

Our way of living is antithetical to the notion of significant withdrawal from life. Visitors to our culture are quick to point out that we seem to be in a hurry always, that we are obsessive about using our time fully, that we make an automatic assumption that empty time is wasted time, and that each new day is to be attacked, charged, a battle to be waged. A "Bache Broker" is up before dawn and can't even finish his lunch without rushing to the phone - a better ad for an ulcer was never made, or a sillier ad, by the way.

Dutch Roman Catholic theologian Henri Nouwen at Yale Divinity School is one of the more popular writers and lecturers these days. One of the reasons, I think, is that he understands our culture with the objectivity of an outsider. He writes, for instance, "We are very busy people. We have many meetings to attend, many visits to make. Our agendas are filled with appointments, our days and weeks are filled with plans and projects. There is seldom a period in which we do not know what to do, and we move through life in such a constricted way that we do not even take time to rest and wonder if any of the things we think, say, or do, are worth thinking, saying, or doing. We simply go along with the many 'musts' and 'oughts' which have been handed to us." (Henri Nouwen, Solitude and Contemporary Ministry, a 3-part series in Sojourners, June, July & August 1980).

It's a bit of a compulsion with us, isn't it? We know better: we know that life can go on without us, but we persist in throwing ourselves into activity with such grim determination and total devotion that you'd think everything really did depend on us, that the company or club or university or God's Kingdom depends entirely on our energy and work. Now, it's news to no one that it isn't true. Nor is it terribly helpful to point out the harmful effects of our compulsiveness about activity.

It may be helpful to ask why we are this way. I think it's a matter of our identity. Just as Jesus had to work out a matter of His own identity, so we are here dealing with our own identity. Our culture defines persons in terms of function. "Who are you?" means essentially "What do you do? How do you earn your living?" Young proponents of the Futurist Movement believe that we must stop defining people by function and when asked "What do you do?" respond, "Why, I breathe, eat, sleep a lot, love a little bit. Sometimes I hum. Occasionally I go for a walk. Mostly, I think." If you want to find out how they earn a living, you have to ask it that way. You must not assume that a person is what he or she does.

It's not easy to make that transition. All our lives we have tied value to performance Professional athletes, University coaches certainly, exist in a world where everyone understands the direct relationship between value and function. It's no wonder that the National Football League is becoming the most popular metaphor for the American way of life. We have come to believe that an individual's worth is a product of his or her performance. Personally our worth, our individual value, is measured by the same yardstick. Our worth is not indigenous to us. Our value does not adhere automatically. It has to be produced, earned, forged, hammered. And if we're not making it: if we're not living up to our own production quotas, why, the prescription is quite clear: we just tighten up a little bit, dig in deeper, put our shoulder to the wheel more purposefully, "when the going gets tough, the tough get going" and all that, and work harder and longer hours.

The tragedy is that it doesn't work. The goal of frantic, compulsive activity is a sense of self-worth. Apparently all it produces is anger: anger at the unfairness of it all: deep, often unexpressed rage at spouse, family, employer, the government, the whole lousy system, or God himself. And sometimes it produces worse than that. John Ciardi wrote somewhere that an "ulcer is nothing more than a poem that was never written..." and perhaps a heart attack is only a symphony that was never composed. Perhaps dead marriages are only "I love you, I need you, I want you" that never got said: and perhaps empty lives are only vacations not taken, and passions never expressed, and prayers never prayed - because, of all things, we were too busy.

It's not only our compulsive busyness that keeps us out of the creative wilderness, of course. The wilderness is where you go to be alone; but our life is open, public. The vogue is to share, to tell all, to ventilate your feelings. It is a national pastime. Johnny Carson invites you to nightly voyeurism. Again, Henri Nouwen has a helpful insight... "let us raise the question of whether our lavish sharing is not more compulsive than virtuous, and instead of creating community tends to flatten out our life together. Often, after sharing we feel that something precious has been taken away from us, that holy ground has been trodden upon." (Ibid., July p.24).

Those curious desert hermits, by the way, avoided talking about faith because they thought it released the religious emotion they needed for personal reasons, a little like keeping the window closed to release the heat.

We are open, public, sharing, and very talkative. We are inundated with words. We are, Nouwen suggests, the "chatty society". In the second century one of our desert friends observed, "I have often repented of having spoken, but never of having remained silent." (Ibid., p.18). And the philosopher Pascal was of the opinion that "all the evils of life have fallen upon us because men will not sit alone quietly in a room." (See Leslie Weatherhead The Significance of Silence, Chapter 1).

We fear silence. The early settlers used to beat pots and pans at night to scare away the beasts, real and imagined, which roamed the primal wilderness. So it is with much of the noise of life. We avoid loneliness, silence, solitude. We don't step back from life much because we're not comfortable there.

What we encounter in silence is first, ourselves. The mystics have always known that the only way to convince a person of the reality of sin is not to argue the point or preach sermons about it, but to allow the person to live with no company but his or her own for a while. Nouwen reflects: "In solitude I get rid of my scaffoldings: no friends to talk to, no telephone calls to make, no meetings to attend, no music to entertain me, no books to distract me, just me - naked, vulnerable, weak, broken, sinful... everything in me wants to run to my friends, my work and my distractions so that I can forget my nothingness." (Ibid., June p.17).

I have an idea that when we are forced to encounter ourselves, to live with no company but our own for a while, what we meet is our own mortality. I have an idea that at the heart of it all, our frantic busyness and incessant noise and persistent openness are simply our way of combating, denying and disguising our mortality. Stripped of all that - in silence and aloneness, we come face to face with our own death.

Why do that? Because that, too, even that pain, is necessary to make us whole and honestly alive. Because Jesus began there. Because a time in the wilderness can be creative, healthy, life-giving. We know, I think, something of the creativity and problem solving potential of solitude. We have had the experience of working on a problem, struggling at our desk and when we move away a bit, take a break, withdraw from the intensity of the struggle, of stumbling into the solution, almost as if by magic. Creative energy is released when

you step back a bit. Working on the problem creates enough stress to inhibit the very creativity the problem requires. Einstein confessed that he got his best ideas while shaving Joggers jog, at least in part, I think, because the enforced solitude allows them to resolve problems. And Rollo May in a study of creativity wrote: "If we are too rigid we will never let ourselves be aware of the knowledge that exists on another level within us. But the insight cannot be born until the conscious tension is relaxed." (The Courage to Create, p.66).

We know, as well, I think, the creative power of silence, solitude, withdrawal even in our relationships. Sometimes good relationships demand solitariness, aloneness, privacy, silence. Good marriages include space and time for each to be alone. Healthy parent-child relationships require privacy for each. Trips away for husband and wife together - but also separately, are often good therapy. Nouwen said it poetically: "Love consists in this, that two solitudes protect and border and salute each other." (Reaching Out, p.67).

Sometimes love means not having to say anything. Sometimes words make superficial what needs to be profound and deep and real. Sometimes the best advice of all is a reversal of the traditional cliche: "don't just say something: stand there." A good friend of mine says that preachers particularly "try to make sense out of something that is inherently mysterious, try to say what they don't know." If you have ever tried to talk to someone whose dearest love just died, or someone who just received devastating personal news, or - for that matter - someone touched by incredible, unexpected joy, you know that there are events before which we ought to be quiet. My friend wrote: "There are times to speak and times to remain silent. More often than not the times to be silent come exactly at the moment when the demand for answers nobody can give is the greatest. There are problems that cannot be solved, tragedies that cannot be fixed, things broken cannot be mended, times when options run out." (Dennis Shoemaker, Don't Talk With Your Mouth Full, a sermon, July 27, 1980).

Then, we need to be silent. Then we need to step back. Then we need to pray: not the discursive lectures we ordinarily deliver to God, enlightening Him as to the sophisticatio of our theology, telling Him about the body politic and our own socio-economic struggles, but the honest prayer of the heart - "God help me! Jesus save me! God love me!" We need to pray which is always, at least in part, listening for God, "being useless and inactive in His presence," being available to Him.

Angels came -

Jesus Christ calls His people to a stance of radical involvement in the world. In the final analysis, I believe, the desert people in the second century went too far and distorted the Gospel. God doesn't want us to remove oursleves from life. Our salvation, if His Son is to be trusted, is wrapped up with a life of discipleship in the world. Our faith is public. But we are called, as well, to privacy. He calls us away, apart, to step back from life on occasion, to sort it all out, to see where we've been and where we are going, to solve some problems and rearrange some priorities - and - to confront God himself - who is always there for us.

Amen.

God eternal, help us to step back - with grace, but also determination. Call us away, Father. When we are too busy, fill us with anxious impatience until we obey. And in our wilderness come to us, strengthen us, love us, save us: through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.